

Your Own Private Whistler

If you like North America's most popular ski resort, you're not alone. But at the Callaghan Backcountry Lodge, you can be.

We were midway into the 12-mile snowmobile ride that separates British Columbia's Callaghan Backcountry Lodge from the closest stretch of road when our host, Nic Slater, pulled to the side of the trail and shut the engine down. My friends Michael and Heidi and I each followed suit and took in the view of the 8,000-foot Callaghan Massif, shimmering above the giant white pines. It was a long moment before we noticed the depth of the silence. We hadn't seen another human since we left our cars at the side of Route 99, eight miles south of Whistler/Blackcomb, and we hadn't heard anything but engines and the wind in the 40 minutes since we left the drum-and-bass din of Whistler's après scene. "Man, just think of all those people back there," Michael said, shaking his head. "They have no idea this is here."

Twenty minutes later, we came to a stop in front in front of Callaghan Lodge, a simple red-cedar inn with five bedrooms. Nestled in the crease of a massive valley surrounded by sawtooth peaks, it's the only full-service backcountry lodge in the Whistler region. Just 20 miles from a resort visited by more than two million skiers each winter, we were the only souls in the only structure in the valley, with 8,600 acres to entertain us. It was as if we had a pristine, undeveloped Whistler all to ourselves, and, in essence, we did.

Ironically, the Callaghan Valley was one of the original targets of the massive 1960s development that would become Whistler/Blackcomb, but it was deemed too remote and difficult to reach. Indeed, it was during a deep-backcountry trek in 1981 that Slater, a ski bum and part-time contractor, spotted the future site of the lodge. Within a year he had raised a cabin, and in 1998 he opened the lodge. Even today, this place is unconnected to civilization by road, telephone, or even electric lines (it has a propane furnace and a generator). "Every day, I think how lucky I am this didn't end up becoming a resort," Slater says.

But don't feel the need to forgo skiing and boarding. The Callaghan Valley shares Whistler/Blackcomb's choice alpine terrain, but is blessed with an extra 60 inches of snow each year. There aren't any lifts, of course, but Slater and his staff arrange for backcountry guides, cat- and heli-tours, and jaunts over to what locals simply call "the Resort." Or you can kick-and-glide on the lodge's 19 miles of groomed nordic tracks. Or tour the valley on snowmobile or snowshoes. Or simply while away the day playing nickel poker by the stone fireplace. Point is, the Callaghan experience can be as active or slothful, earthy or haughty, as you like. To begin with, Michael Downey, the live-in four-star chef, prepares menus to your specifications -- everything from turkey chili to stuffed lobster tails. Then Slater and his partner, Brad Sills, do the same with your activities. If you ask, the lodge will bring in shiatsu masseuses, or ski instructors who'll start your tour right at the front door.

That's where our guide, Mark Schoenrank, met us after breakfast our first morning. He helped us strap our gear to our snowmobiles, and we sped along to the foot of Calpow Glacier, occasionally rope-towing on our skis behind the Yamahas. After a casual climb to 7,300 feet on snowshoes and skins, we reached a huge bowl blanketed calf-deep in freshly fallen powder. From its rim, Schoenrank pointed a pole at the twin summits of Whistler and Blackcomb. "There's where you skied yesterday," he said. We could make out the broad cuts in the mountains' flanks where 16,000 people were lining up to follow in one another's tracks. Schoenrank turned to the 3,000 vertical feet of virgin snow below us. "And here's where you're skiing today." Then, one by one, we dropped into the bowl. All four of us.

NOTES

Rates at the CALLAGHAN BACKCOUNTRY

604-938-0616 or callaghancountry.com start at \$314 per person for a three-day, two-night stay, including snowmobile transport and a basic menu. The lodge can also arrange a variety of guide services, equipment rentals, spa services, and special meals.

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